

India: Transgender People and Employment: An Interview with Swetha Sudhakar

Monday 22 August 2022, by [Dalit History Month \(DHM\)](#), [SUDHAKAR Swetha](#) (Date first published: 26 April 2022).

As we explore the themes around labor and migration this month, we speak to Swetha about economic and employment challenges and strides made by trans people in these areas.

Swetha let's begin by talking about your own employment experiences and how you eventually came to found your own organization.

I have been running Born2Win for almost a decade now. I was actually working for some other organizations prior to this that. Those organizations were largely serving MSM ("Men-having-sex-with-men") demographics in the area of AIDS/HIV awareness and action. These organizations served the LGBTQI community as a whole but were often led by cis- and gay-identified people.

Initially, I was really happy to work in this job. I was a really good worker. I did my job thoroughly and professionally and I always had documentation for whatever I achieved. But eventually, I began to notice that I was not being taken into leadership positions despite the fact that the organization was benefiting greatly and becoming very visible from my labor there. Even when a funder asked that I be placed as the Project Manager for a particular initiative, they refused to promote me. They gave my position to another cis-gay person of their own caste.

I was paid so less. From 2003-2010, I was paid between INR 1400 and INR 7000 a month (USD 18-USD 90). During these times, I would often meet illiterate trans people who would be in need. Often I ended up giving away up to INR 3000 (USD 40) from my own salary monthly. All this meant I was left with the bare minimum with which to live my own life, pay the rent and everything else. I just felt that my knowledge, my work, my talent was not respected there.

In addition to that, I understood that AIDS/HIV service is important work. However, I think our community needs more. They need real empowerment. They need access to education and livelihood. They need to enter the mainstream work and life. So the efforts had to be about more than AIDS/HIV. This is why I started my own organization in 2013.

Tell us more about Born2Win. What have been some of the most memorable achievements of the organization in the past decade.

Born2Win is a trans-led organization. Everyone who works here is a trans person and we have 8 employees. Our mission is 'Education! Employment! Empowerment!'. So far we have recognized 146 transgender persons as "Trans Achievers" by bestowing an award on them for their work in the community and their personal survival achievements.

We celebrate every April 15 as Transgender Day. There is a Mother's Day, a Father's Day and a day for just about everyone else. We deserve a day of recognition too.

Through our work, we have secured employment for over a 100 transgender persons such that they have been able to leave behind begging or sex work.

We do a Ms. Trans Queen Tamil Nadu event every year. It is a fashion event but it is also more than that. We want to show that we are also happy in society, leading joyous lives, loving ourselves, and we are not dependent on anyone. Off the event, we select 13 trans women every year and provide them guidance throughout the year on education and employment. We have paid the university and school fees of many trans community members through the years too.

It is not easy to do all this. We have partially managed with my own funds from consulting jobs and other contractual employment offered to me. We also get some funds from individual donors, through for example, October Giving Days. We don't have any government funding or foundation funding and yet we have run successfully for 9 years. So much so, that we are seen as competitors to the other NGOs in this field!

I consider Born2Win my baby. Trans women can't have their biological babies so I consider the organization a baby through which I help my other trans children.

One of the problems you mentioned is funding. What is your opinion about the current state of funding and how would you like that to see that improve?

Honestly, I want to say, there are any organizations that do really good work on a daily basis. I am not talking just about Born2Win but the sector as a whole. That are trans-led. Please work with us continuously and consistently. Don't only work with us on one or two projects, on a tight and unrealistic timeline and set rigid targets. Give us time and the assurance of continued support. See what we can make happen. We can do amazing work. In fact, we already do amazing work even without funding!

Funders also need to expand on who they fund. Funding the same people again and again. Not taking into account the situations on the ground or the accountability of these organizations to the people on the ground, is not a good way to impact the community. Expand your pools and support trans-led work and trans-led organizations.

There are efforts from the state to place trans people in government sector jobs. But there is also a huge private sector that hasn't really opened up to the community. What do you think is a better option for trans people looking for jobs.

The government jobs are actually really hard to get. There are many hurdles and some of that is now being worked on through the ask for reservation (affirmative action) for transgender people. It is actually easier to get a job in the private sector. Born2Win has been establishing relationships within both sectors. With the private sector, we see many companies, are willing to work with trans people. The intention is there.

However, many trans people who have gotten jobs in these places drop out within a few months. Why is this? They tell us — "Oh we gave them the jobs, and they dropped out and didn't want it, what can we do?" But these statements are actually wrong. The reality they only wanted to hire trans people on paper. They did not actually want to create the proper environment of understanding, acceptance, and provide facilities for trans people.

So, for example, when the trans person starts working, the other colleagues have opinions on which bathrooms they should use. They often misgender them and can't even use the basic correct

pronoun or even dead-name them. How can trans people survive in workplaces when they are subjected to such a fundamental level of disrespect and othering? Seeing all this, we have started to ask for more conditions in the employment offers, including a minimal contract of one year and proper gender sensitization program implementation at workplaces through their HR teams.

You all have also helped set up several entrepreneurial initiatives like soap-making businesses. Tell us more about these efforts.

Yes we have! We have started several self-employment efforts. A soap-making business is one example. We have also gotten 7 transgender women to run food cart businesses. Many trans women I know are really good cooks and this has been a way for them to channel that into a livelihood. We also started sari businesses and DTP (Desktop Publishing) businesses. All these efforts can be managed with a small initial capital and can make a difference for a person's economic possibilities.

Many trans people are doing sex work. What is your opinion on sex work, especially seeing that you have started initiatives to prevent trans people from having no option but to do sex work or begging.

I want to correct you here. Trans people are not doing sex work because of "having no options", they are doing sex work or begging because of not being given any options.

I want to say sex work is also a kind of work and our community members are employed in it. Even cis women do sex work. Let's say there is a cis woman who has lost her husband and has been thrown out of her family. She may not know any other work and want to survive. Trans people too do the same.

There is nothing about this to be called undignified. It is work and some people actually are able to make a decent living from it. But that is more often the exception. Sex work is risky work that doesn't pay much. There are threats to your well-being associated with it. There is risk of contracting diseases, there is risk of attacks, and police harassment.

Here is the thing, whether you all give us options or not, we are always creating our own options. A cis person may have family connections they can take loans from, banks that will offer them money to start from. We don't often have these sources. We do sex work to make up for some of these lack of networks. So what? Take a young cis man who has a Bachelor degree and is earning some INR 15,000 salary per month and compare it to a trans person making the same amount of money. The trans person will still have a harder time to pay the bills and make the month through because they don't have support networks, families, and privileges. They have more people in their community to support everyday. Everything has to be managed on their own.

Telling sex workers to go to sex work rehabilitation or telling them to leave sex work is not our place. We don't have the right. Instead, create other options. Just see — create good jobs, that excite and fulfill people, that gives them a good sustainable source of income and see that people will leave sex work in a heartbeat.

In many places, there is now discussion of reservation for trans people. There has been a proposal to offer reservation by clubbing all transgender people under the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category. What impact do you think this will have on the transgender community?

Transgender people are seriously marginalized in society and therefore they need reservation. This will help us in the most crucial sectors for us — education and employment. However, what we

want is horizontal reservation. Not an OBC category. See — in theory, in the Tirunangai Jamaat (Transwomen Society) — there is an ideology that among us there will be no differences based on caste or religion. But this is not our practical observation. Everyone has their caste and many have their caste certificates even. There is caste among us as well. So it is really crucial that we get reservation and that, in particular, we get horizontal reservation that respects all our identities of marginalization.

There are many young, trans kids out there who could be navigating some difficult personal circumstances. As someone who has also gone through the same struggles and is seen as a role model today, do you have a message for them?

I would like to say YOU BE YOU. You don't need to change yourself for anyone. You are good as you are. But I won't say run away from home and come and join Tirunangai (trans women) Society right away. I would say your studies are very important. You are a child of your parents, let them educate you.

Fight to finish your studies. Cis people have hetero-normative family structures and someone will always look after them. But we, we have to look after ourselves and each other. Study, after that, you can live as you please because you will be able to get a job and no one can ask you questions. You can be independent and survive and win in this society. But focus on your education. One day you can come and work for our community. And the change will automatically come in society when we work from deep within our hearts.

I also think state governments should start gender understanding and awareness programs for teachers. Many teachers recognize that there are kids in their classes who are trans but how they react to it makes a huge difference for these young children.

Do you have a message for cis people in society?

Please educate yourselves about gender, about transgender people and about our issues. It is your duty. If you don't know the most basic things — if you can't even not misgender them on a daily basis, how can they work with you? Take up your responsibility to educate yourselves and then come and become friends with us, become our co-workers, allies and everything else.

DHM Editorial Team
Trans Rights Now Collective

Swetha Sudhakar is the Founder-Director of Born2Win Social Welfare Organization serving transgender community members in the areas of education and employment. She is a social and human rights activist. She holds an MA in Sociology, a BA in Public Administration, and a Diploma in Counseling. Swetha is also a writer and is publishing three volumes of poetry in Tamil including, கிழவர்கள் எழுதின இயற்கை (Children Who Write Nature), மனம் மற்றும் முகம் (Mane and Mustache), and நட்சத்திரம் பார்த்து (The Star Who Saw the Sky)

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P.S.

Note to readers: This post was to be released on April 15, 2022 to commemorate Transgender's Day, but due to unavoidable delays we are publishing this on later date.

This interview was originally conducted in Tamil and has been translated and edited to English.

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<https://dalithistorymonth.medium.com/trans-people-and-work-an-interview-with-swetha-sudhakar-19da5738270f>